

Dialogue Sermon Outline
Rabbi Jordi Battis & Rev. Reebee Girash
Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington
June 9, 2024

Psalm 67 - The Inclusive Bible

O God, show us kindness and bless us, and make your face smile on us!
For then the earth will acknowledge your ways, and all the nations will
know of your power to save.

Let the peoples praise you, O God, let all the peoples praise you!

Let the nations shout and sing for joy, for you dispense true justice to the
world— you guide the nations of the earth!

Let the peoples shout and sing for joy; let all the peoples praise you!

The land has given its harvest: God, our God, has blessed us.

May God bless us, and may God be revered even to the ends of the earth!

Genesis 1:26-27 - The Inclusive Bible

Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, to be like us. Let
them be stewards of the fish in the sea, the birds of the air, the cattle, the
wild animals, and everything that crawls on the ground.” 27 Humankind
was created as God’s reflection: in the divine image God created them;
female and male, God made them.

The Priestly Benediction, Numbers 6:22-26, NRSV

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, “Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying:
Thus you shall bless the Israelites: You shall say to them: The LORD bless
you and keep you;

the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;

the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.

Reebee

You and I have known each other about two years. LICA, the Lexington Interfaith Community Association, has moved us from passing acquaintances in town to good friends in just that time. It's what LICA does: intentionally make space for relationships and friendships that bridge traditions.

When we gather - in person - in humility - in care - it is beautiful and it is essential. When we break bread together, when we weep with each other, when we move toward each other in sacred friendship, our hearts and our worlds heal just a tiny, tiny, tiny bit.

LICA's decades of deliberate, relational work are precious. Never more so than this year. Y'all it's been hard since October 7. We've tried to show up for folks in pain. We've tried to listen to each other. We've tried to keep those friendships going. It hasn't worked perfectly. But we want to share just a bit of that process and friendship with you today.

Jordi

I think we are all aware that the last eight months have brought into focus so many of the divisions in our society, and created cracks in the most tender places. Exactly in the places where we have been at our most fragile and afraid as human beings, across cultures and religions and identifiers: those are the places that most need our attention and care and enactment of *love*, and instead those have become the places where we're taking our fears out on each other. What does it mean that we've gotten to a point where many people seem to be pitting antisemitism against Islamophobia, when in fact they are two different dimensions of hate, that certainly should never be seen as a zero-sum game. As if only one people can be loved at a time or loathed at a time. We know from human history that where one hatred rises, others quickly follow. Hatreds and fears breed more hatreds and fears.

This is why I agree with you, Reverend Girash, about how important intentionality has been during this time in interfaith spaces. It's not only that we may be hearing different news or seeing things from different angles; it's that what is happening in the world and in our personal interactions is playing out for each of us within the context of our own narratives, both individually and in the groups we are a part of. This is multiplied by the fact that many of us are understanding the same words to mean different things and are not aware that we are being divided by what seems like shared language—so our communication itself is breaking down. It's only been when we can slow ourselves down and check words and emotions with each other at every step of the way that we can have understanding of each other at all. We don't all need to agree, but *seeing* each other as the full human beings each of us is, requires us to go at a pace that is countercultural in our extraordinarily fast-moving society. The internet demands statements and outrage, while our relationships with each other and nurturing trust across our differences—those take a lot of time.

Reebee

Most preachers - pastors and rabbis - over our careers find certain themes emerging. You might even say we repeat ourselves, through maybe a more charitable way to say it is that we are consistent.

We got to talking about our key themes last week. Pilgrims, you have likely figured out that my top messages are about being loved by God, loving God, and loving our neighbors.

Faced with a world that likes to criticize, I preach God's words to the people in the book of Isaiah: *You are precious in my sight, and I love you.*

I preach the *imago dei* of Genesis 1:26-27: that each and every person reflects and carries the divine, the holy, the sacred and the good.

And I preach that we are called to love God, and to our neighbors as we love ourselves - because our neighbors are made in God's image and loving our neighbors is loving God.

This is what grounds interfaith life in my mind - the principle that every person is called good by God - every person embodies the sacred, is loved by God, and for that reason is worthy of our love and respect...

Jordi

I was so aware as you shared these “top sermon themes” of yours how much overlap yours have with mine. What you call *imago dei*, we refer to in the Jewish community as being *b'tzelem Elohim*: made in the image of God. This idea says that every single person in the world is equally precious, because how can one facet of God be more important than any other?

There are three ways that the Torah gives the command “to love.” We are told, as you quoted, *V'ahavta et reiacha kamocho*, to love your fellow human being as yourself (Lev. 19:18), and later in the same chapter of Leviticus, we see that same verb “*V'ahavta*”—the command to love.

הַגֵּר | הַגֵּר אֶתְכֶם וְאַהַבְתָּ לּוֹ כְּמוֹךָ

Hageir hagar itchem v'ahavta lo kamocho

You shall love the stranger who resides
with you as yourself. (Lev. 19:34)

And that verse goes on: *ki gerim hayitem b'erezt Mitzrayim*, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. This part of the verse is central Jewish self-understanding generally, and is another one of the sermons I give again and again: the idea that because we have had the experience of being outsiders, we are called on to find our way to compassion and care, for every single other person, and to see the fullness of their humanity.

The third commandment to love is one that you referred to as well, from the book of Deuteronomy: *V'ahavta et Adonai Elohecha*, that you should love God with all your heart, your soul, and your might. This same passage is central to Jewish liturgy—we read it at the heart of every service. It's a strange passage because, although we generally think of love as an emotion, it goes on to list actions and thoughts rather than feelings: You should speak these words and teach them to

your children, and you should keep them in mind whenever you sit down and whenever you rise up (Deut. 6:4). This idea, that love is a set of actions we *can* take and *must* take, even when we're not feeling it, is probably my third main sermon.

I think that my other sermons have a lot to do with holding complexity: How do we practice joy and gratitude without denying fear or grief? How can we maintain our own point of view while honoring the points of view of others? How can we hold compassion even when we are angry or in pain?

This last one has been so central to the themes we've been revisiting again and again since October 7: right now we are holding on to the commitment to care about Israelis and Palestinians at the same time. To acknowledge our own fears and pain within the Jewish community without letting go of our deep distress for the terrible destruction in Gaza; and vice versa: to experience deep distress for Gaza and Gazans while still letting ourselves acknowledge and feel the trauma of what happened in the border towns in Israel where so many of us had friends and family.

Reebee

This reminds me of the phrase, "Hearts can break for more than one group of people at a time."

Jordi

In Jewish literature and thought as it has developed over the last 2000 years, one of the things that has been most valued is the acknowledgement of different points of view and putting them in conversation with each other. The Talmud is filled with passages where the ancient rabbis are debating about how to understand a story or commandment from the Torah. One will say, "I learned from my teacher who learned from his teacher who learned from her teacher" that it means this. And another one will say, "Well, I learned from *my* teacher who learned from her teacher who learned from his teacher who learned from his

teacher” that it means this other thing. And both of those teachings—and often times many others—are both recorded and put in conversation with each other. Sometimes the rabbis will say, “We hold by so-and-so’s opinion.” But they still preserved the different points of view, because someday a different one may be right, and, regardless, the different points of view are there to help each other and hone each other.

For me, one of the hardest and saddest things over these last eight months has been how terribly forced into corners all of us have been. Not listening to each other’s stories, assumed by others to be thinking one thing and not another. We are in a society that so longs to categorize people and pit them against each other that from October 7 onward, the term Jew was conflated with Israeli, which was conflated with the current leaders of the Israeli government, and all of those have been conflated with whiteness and European colonialism as well—even though many Israelis are not Jewish, the majority of Israeli Jews are from ancestors who never left the Middle East, and most Israelis (certainly all of the Israelis that I know) have been protesting the actions of the current Israeli government for well over a year—long before October 7, 2023. Meanwhile, Gazans have been conflated with Palestinianians and Arabs and Muslims and Hamas, when it has *never* been that simple. (If it had, we would not be in the situation we are in in the first place.) And, terribly, the Hamas attacks and the war have brought out so much generational trauma for everyone involved. The fear that many Jews around the world right now are feeling is not out of nowhere: it’s based on real experience in our own lifetimes and on the experiences of our parents and our grandparents, back and back and back through time.

I think that one of the things that is really hard to understand in a country on the scale of America is that Israel is *tiny* and the Jewish community around the world is also *tiny*. Israelis are at most one degree of separation from each other, and *maybe* two from American Jews. The people killed and taken hostage on October 7 are close friends of my close friends. They—and the soldiers who are being sent into battle—are relatives of Isaiah congregants. Personally, I have cousins who lived on one of the kibbutzim that was attacked; they were listening to what was

happening outside of their house and were spared by what was truly only a stroke of luck.

Reverend Girash has asked me about what it means to take care of each other right now, while we are coming from different backgrounds and opinions and understandings about what should and shouldn't be done in this conflict. I think that in many ways what I hope for—and I think that this is probably true of many others in the Jewish community—is that those around us will understand that the situation is unbearably complex; that so many truths stand alongside each other on the same page and that one doesn't negate another; and that, even if it looks like the story we are in right now is one that is eight months old, or eighty years old, it all goes back much, much farther than that. I think it was William Faulkner who said, "The past is never dead. It's not even past." That. We are all carrying around many generations and many truths.

Reebee -

Since October, every single week in worship - and I'm sure every day in our private prayers - we have prayed. For the people of Israel. For those who live in Gaza. For our Jewish siblings. For our Muslim neighbors. For peace, which is always our prayer.

Our prayers since October 7 have changed, to be sure. They have become increasingly complex.

Right after that awful day, we were grieving and angry for the terrible attack by Hamas, the shocking loss of life, the taking of so many hostages, and the existential threat to the Jewish people that October 7 symbolized.

I remember sitting with you and hearing how close this atrocity felt to you, to your family, to your community. Through your sharing, tears became part of my prayers - as we cried out for the return of the hostages, I was praying for friends and family members of friends.

Our prayers expanded to include the safety of our Muslim neighbors - also informed by LICA connections - and we were soon also compelled to pray for the safety of civilians in Gaza.

Over time, we began to pray for a bilateral ceasefire. Our faith values peace. *(Both our faiths cherish peace.)* The humanitarian crisis in Gaza grieved us. Never denying the horror of October 7, we found our hearts breaking for two groups of people.

But I was nervous about what to say. I wondered what my dear friends in LICA would think of our prayers for a bilateral ceasefire. I was nervous to even say aloud the questions I have about the policies of some government leaders of Israel since October 7. Could I ask those questions? That's when I had to trust in the friendships we've built up in LICA.

Jordi -

Our prayers at Temple Isaiah are similar... At first we prayed for the release of the hostages. And, as months have gone on, so many of us have grown in our conviction it's not only the hostages who have been held captive but by all those who are caught in the web of this violence and bloodshed. For several months now, we have been offering a prayer each week at our congregation's Shabbat service.

Reebee -

Our communities' prayers have much in common. Rabbi Battis, the next part of our service is a time of prayer. I wonder if you would begin our prayer time by sharing the prayer you're talking about?

Jordi -

Yes I'd be glad to....

*A prayer for protection of life and for the release of those held captive*¹

Even with these words of gratitude on our lips, we are profoundly aware of the long months of suffering that began on October 7, and of the cruelties that now trap so many. We offer these prayers, as our plea that this time of bloodshed and fear will soon come to an end—

Eloheinu: Elohei chol basar, Yotzeir b'reishit—
(Jeremiah 32:27; Talmud Sotah 40a)

Our God — God of all human beings,
Who created each person with a spark of the Divine,
we pray now for the urgent protection of human life.
May our hearts be filled with compassion,
our minds with wisdom, and our hands with action,
as we strive to safeguard the dignity and well-being of all Your children
May none stand idly by the blood of any other, (Leviticus 19:16)
and may we remember that preserving life is our highest duty in this, Your
creation.

Our God — “refuge for the oppressed, refuge in times of trouble” (Psalm 9:10) —
send complete rescue and full redemption to those held captive.

Bring them our prayers that they be protected from all harm.

Implant understanding in the heart of the captor

that they may return the captives in wholeness of body and spirit.

Grant wisdom to the Israel Defense Forces

that they may secure freedom for the captives without further loss of life.

Grant strength of spirit and courage of heart

to all who release bonds of captivity.

For we know well — our lives are bound up with each other’s as one (Talmud Shevuot 39a): Jew, Muslim and Christian; Israeli and Palestinian, *v’chol yoshvei teivel* (Psalm 33:8) — and all with whom we share this world.

¹ Adapted from *Birkon Artzi: Prayers for Unique Moments in Israel* and “An Urgent Prayer for the Protection of Human Life - April 2024” by Rabbi Andy Vogel & Rabbi Seth Goldstein.

May peace and justice fill Your world, and may we be among those who make it so.

Reebec

And let the people say, *Amen*.